

Chaucer's Prologue to The Canterbury Tales – A summary

Geoffrey Chaucer, the man responsible for the spreading and development of Middle English dialect was not just a poet but was a courtier, philosopher, astronomer etc. However, the father of English literature is known remembered today for his work “The Canterbury Tales” which has more than seventeen thousand lines and twenty four stories. The intention of the Prologue is to take the reader into a journey, where every character in the work is described.

“Whan that April with his shoures soote

The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,

And bathed every veine in swich licour

Of which vertu engendered is the flour

Whan Zephirus eek with his sweet breeth...

Than longen folk to goon on pilgimages”

The month of April arrives with sweet showers, removing the droughts of March and rejuvenates the roots making the land grow green. By bathing in the sweet liquor of April and kissed with the winds of Zephyr the flowers long to bloom stronger and ever more beautiful. At this wonderful time of the year, people who long to go for pilgrimages set out with the season's blessings. So begins the magnum opus of Chaucer and the scene gradually shifts to the Tabard Inn, a place in Southwark, London. At the Inn the narrator (Chaucer) was in preparation to set out on a pilgrimage, when a group of twenty-nine arrive at the Tabard. Through their conversation it is known that they are also going for a pilgrimage and the narrator joins them. The narrator, based on the individual status of the twenty-nine members, starts to describe them and their qualities.

The Knight – He was involved in Crusades and fought battles in many countries, but he is greatly honoured for the worthiness and courtesy he shows. He is a man who loved freedom, chivalry, honour and truth. After the Prologue it is the Knight who begins the first tale. He narrates a romantic story of a woman and two knights who fall in love with her.

The Squire – The Knight's son, a bachelor with lustful heart, who is dressed in embroidered clothes. He looks unmanly yet has passion for playing flute, singing and is very eager about to be recognized as a man of literature. He narrates the tale of a mysterious knight who comes to the court of Tartary with gifts.

The Yeoman – He is a freeborn servant to the Knight and travels with him. As an experienced servant he skilfully looks the Knight's arrows and carries with him a great deal of weaponry used by his master. Some of the weaponry includes sword, dagger, arrows and

a bracer. The Yeoman is shown as a pious man with the mention of possessing silver St. Christopher on his chest. The freeborn servant doesn't narrate a tale.

The Prioress – She is called as Madame Eglantine by the narrator because of her sweet singing tone and gentle heart. The Prioress is so piteous; she would cry her heart out if a mouse falls in a trap. The Prioress is so charitable; she loves to serve everyone at the table with admirable manners. She carries a golden brooch that with shiny impressions that say:

“Amor vincit omnia” – Love conquers all.

However, the tale she narrates is not a gentle romance, but it is of a murder. A child who sings on the Virgin Mary is killed by hateful Jews who don't like the child singing.

The Second Nun – She is the secretary of Madame Eglantine, the Prioress. The narrator doesn't describe her much, but in the Canterbury tales she narrates the life of St. Cecilia as her contribution to the pilgrimage.

The Monk – The man who loves to be modern has a habit of hunting. He is handsome to look at with bright eyes and he brings greyhound along with him indicating that he is not an ordinary monk reading books and telling tales of greatness from the word. This monk looks at things differently and often keeps aside the old traditions. He describes a series of tragedies about Lucifer, Sampson, Hercules, Nabugodonosor, Balthasar, etc.

The Friar – The name of the Friar is Huberd (Hubert) who is a licensed friar with permission to beg in several selected districts. He is shown as a happy man with some wantonness and is loved by franklins and woman of the town. The narrator shows him as a beggar with skills to pursue anyone and earn alms as desired. He starts to tell of Summoners, when a debate boils up between him and the Summoner that is cooled down by the Host allowing the Friar to go further.

The Merchant – The narrator describes him quite well of a man with great clothing and forked beard, but at the end states that he cannot understand how people will think of him. According to the description the merchant is a solemn gentleman with great bargaining skills, without having any need of debts. He narrates the story of a blind man, who longs for a union and marries a fair young girl who becomes unfaithful to her husband.

The Clerk – He is a studious man who was educated in Oxford University and has a passion for books. He rides along with the merchant, carries small amount of gold with him and he spends the gold to buy books. The Clerk prefers the company of books rather than luxurious clothes or flamboyant instruments and he speaks only as necessary with a lot of meaning associated to each word. The tale of the Clerk is about a man of aristocratic class who wants to know about the devotion of his wife Griselde by conducting several tests which are harsh.

The Sergeant of the law – He is full of dignity and speaks words of wisdom without any stuttering. By the order of the King, the man of law acts as a judge in assizes court and due to the high status draws huge amount of grants. According to the narrator, the man of law can write legal writings that contain no flaws or errors whatsoever. However, despite having all the wealth and recognition in the society he behaves humbly and rides like a homely

individual with neatly adjusted coat. He narrates the story of a woman named Constance, with numerous tragedies in her life which she overcomes by having faith in Christianity and God.

The Franklin – The man who nourishes himself in “sanguine” humour and delightful food accompanies the Man of Law in the pilgrimage. He is so careful about the food he takes and selects the food and drinks based on the season. The Franklin narrates a desperate tale of a woman who, in order to save her husband, accepts to get associated with another man.

The Haberdasher, The Carpenter, The weaver, The Dyer, The tapestry-maker – All these appear uniform in clothing. The narrator describes them as wearing guildsman’s dress that is very distinctive and their knives are wrought with silver rather than brass. The five men do not contribute a tale to the Canterbury tales during the pilgrimage.

The Cook – From boiling a chicken to preparing ale to making the tastiest of pies, the cook can do anything and everything concerned with the kitchen. Unfortunately, the sight of the cook makes the narrator to pity him due to the shin ulcer he has. He narrates an abruptly ending story of Perking Reveller who is an apprentice; he steals from his master and enjoys dancing at the tavern.

The Shipman – The tanned shipman wears a cloth made of wool that only covers the body to the knees. He is very experienced at sea, fought & lived through many deadly storms and knows every harbour in the region. He used to sail in the ship named “The Maudelayne” and he occasionally brings on board, draught of wine without the awareness of his merchant. The Shipman gives the story of a woman in need of money to pay off the debts her husband had made. In the process, she accepts to be in an affair with an unsuspected man, the monk. He promises to give her money and he does so by borrowing the money from the woman’s husband himself.

The Doctor of Physik – The doctor is dressed in blue and red with outstanding grip about the terms and applications of surgery and in the field of medicines. The doctor knows the cause, the disease, factors influencing the occurrence and the perfect cure. His life seems to be concentrated only on medicine; hence, the narrator describes the doctor as a man who did not study the Holy Bible. He tells the story of Virginius, a bold Knight instead of offering her daughter to sin kills her and makes her blessed by God. In the process, he un-plots the deceit of the judge who want to lay with her and the townsfolk put him in prison. The tale ends with a message against sin and stating that God always watches over the mankind.

The Wife of Bath – The partially deaf woman who was married to five men is the most boisterous of all the travellers. She has a great skill at making cloths and her head is clad with linen. In addition, she travelled Holy places like Boulogne, Rome and Jerusalem and she knows everything about love. She gives out a feministic note on different things such as marriage, men, women and even interprets the Bible in her own way stating that there is no decree written in the book about marrying once.

The Parson – He is considered as a religious man with divine thoughts and preaches the Gospel with all his heart. Due to his devotion, he bounds only to tell the truth and earns only

a little to live and spread the Word. The Parson travels with a staff to meet all the parishioners of his parish without the help of transportation indicating that unlike most corrupt priests he is the man that sacrificed all the desires for preaching. The Parson is the last of the travellers to narrate the tale and he discusses about penitence, confessions, seven deadly sins, etc and they end with Chaucer's retraction.

The Plowman – He is a believer of charity and considers the neighbour as his equal. His means of transportation is a mare and he looks good, peaceful and hard working. However, in the Canterbury Tales, he does not narrate a tale.

The Miller – He is big, muscular and champion at wrestling, with immense power to even break the locked doors with his head. He carries along with him a shield and a sword, he is known for his corn stealing abilities and the skill to sell the same for three times the amount of what they are worth. The Miller narrates the tale of a student who longs to indulge in an affair with a carpenter's wife.

The Manciple – He is described as financial operator who buys religious provisions. Although, he is not highly educated individual (with only knowledge of law) he can certainly manipulate his way around those who are full with wisdom. The Manciple's tale is about crows in relation to the story of Phoebus where a crow speaks of his (Phoebus) wife's unfaithfulness.

The Reeve – He resembles a staff, for he was so slender. But his skill in keeping his granary is unmatched as he always knows the amount of grain there is. The Reeve knows of the treacheries and secrets of the servants, bailiffs and herdsman; hence, they are as scared of him as they are scared of death. He narrates the story of two Oxford students who humiliate a miller with villainous intents.

The Summoner – He has a way to trick people and suffers from skin disease. The hair of his beard seems to fall often, pimples stud his face and his brows have a serious illness. The narrator describes that there is no cure available for the disease of the summoner. The tale seems as a response to the Friar's tale and describes the profession of Friar in the manner of parody.

The Pardoner – He travels along with the summoner and is described by the narrator as the boy with sexual ambiguity. At one point, the pardoner is mentioned as either being a homosexual or a eunuch. The pardoner tells about the death of three rioters in the form of an allegory. The cause of death is avarice (one of the seven deadly sins) and by the tale he tries to sell the pardons he got to the others in the group. However, the host intervenes and stops such attempts from the pardoner.

The Host – The last member to be given a description in the Prologue. Harry Bailly or the host is the owner of the Tabard Inn, where the journey starts. He is the one to come up with the idea of tale-telling game and plays a major role in calming down the company whenever there seems to be a possibility of argument. The original idea of the host was that each of the travellers should give out two tales, but in the Canterbury tales the numbers differ and some of them don't even tell a tale.

The narrator describes everyone, as some suggest according to the class, and the scene is shifted to the next morning when the Host leads them to the watering of St. Thomas. They draw lots and the Knight gets to tell the first tale and the last tale is told by the Parson. The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales ends when the Knight is about to start his tale of romance.

The Narrator (Chaucer)

There is no description of the narrator in the Prologue; however, one can understand the characteristics based on the narrator's style and view of describing others. He often represents himself as being sullen, naive, gregarious and silent. In the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer or the Narrator narrates two tales – "The Tale of Sir Thopas" and "The Tale of Melibee". Further, he ends the tales with a retraction asking the reader to pray for the sins done by him and ends with a note of hope that God will forgive all his sins.